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Gulf War Update
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Media Monitor

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More News Is Bad News for Bush

TV News Coverage of the Bush Administration During 1990

How does TV news cover the presidency? This is our second annual report on network evening news coverage of the Bush administration. This issue of *Media Monitor* examines 2,224 stories on the administration that aired on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. It also compares TV news evaluations of the president with his public approval ratings from Gallup polls.

This issue also examines coverage of the war with Iraq on ABC "World News Tonight." Next month's *Media Monitor* will present complete findings on Gulf War coverage for the three major networks.

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Major Findings:

■ **More Press But Less Praise** TV news coverage of George Bush increased by more than 50 percent in 1990, but nearly two out of three sources criticized him. *Page 2*

■ **Bad News At Black Rock** CBS was toughest on the president, giving him 70 percent negative evaluations. *Page 2*

■ **Molding Viewers' Views** Good press helped the president's public approval ratings more than bad press hurt them. *Page 4*

■ **Now That We Need You...** Evaluations of the military ran 2 to 1 negative before the Gulf crisis, but 2 to 1 positive thereafter. *Page 3*

ABC's Gulf War Coverage:

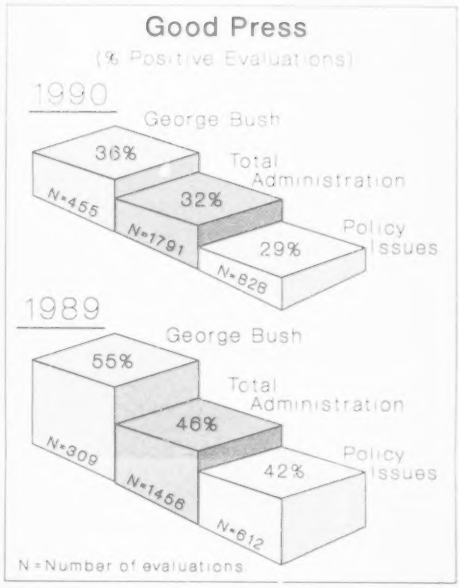
■ **Balancing Act** U.S. policies got almost as much bad press as Iraq's. *Page 5*

■ **The Face Of War** Pictures of civilian damage were almost as frequent as combat visuals. *Page 6*

Finding the Spotlight

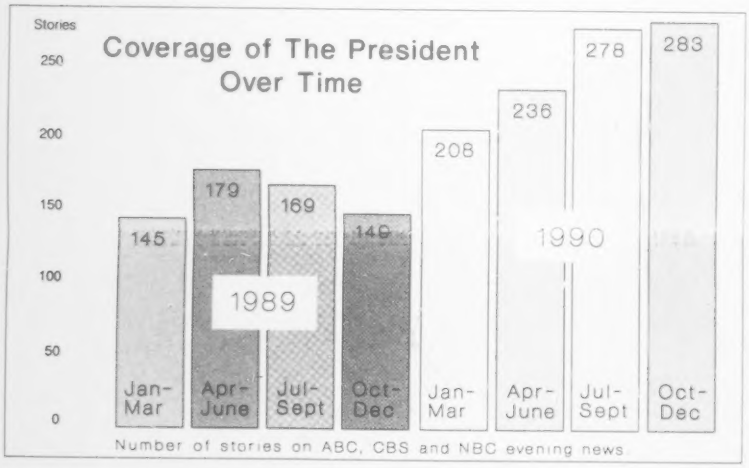
The Bush administration was featured in nearly one out of every six TV news stories during 1990 - 2,224 stories overall, with a total airtime of 66 hours 41 minutes. CBS led with 788 stories totalling 24 hours 27 minutes, followed by NBC (737 stories, 22 hours 21 minutes), and ABC (699 stories, 19 hours 53 minutes). After Iraq invaded Kuwait, daily coverage of the administration increased by 40 percent, from 5.2 to 7.3 stories per night.

In 1989 George Bush received far less personal coverage than other recent presidents had during their first year in office. Bush's 642 TV news stories that year paled in comparison to the 1,782 which featured Ronald Reagan in 1981. The invasion of Panama and the spring summit with Mikhail Gorbachev boosted Bush's visibility in 1990. The Gulf crisis added further to the president's prominence. By year's end Bush's TV news coverage had increased by more than 50 percent above his 1989 totals (642 vs. 1005 stories).



and the administration as a whole all received substantially more bad press in 1990 than in 1989. Among the 1791 statements by sources and reporters that evaluated some aspect of the administration, more than two out of three (68%) were negative. The president himself fared nearly as badly, attracting 64 percent negative evaluations. This marks a clear reversal from 1989, when a majority of sources praised the President. Finally, Bush's policies fared worst of all. Seventy-one percent of sources criticized the administration positions or handling of foreign and domestic issues.

Despite the generally negative cast of TV news coverage, some of the administration's key figures fared quite well. Secretary of State James Baker was frequently praised, rising from 50 percent positive evaluations in 1989 to 67 percent positive in 1990. Supreme Court nominee David Souter did even better, receiving 82 percent positive comments during his confirmation hearings. On the other hand, Vice President Quayle dropped from a 61 percent positive rating in 1989 to only 46 percent positive last year. For example, Ralph Nader cited Quayle to argue against a government pay raise: "If Quayle deserves a raise, the New York Yankees deserve the pennant." (CBS 12/28)



Jeers for the President

CBS was the network most likely to broadcast criticism of the president. Seventy percent of all evaluations of George Bush were negative on CBS, such as this blast from Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) on October 22: "The president's veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1990...[is] part of a disreputable tactic to appeal to public resentment and prejudice." Bush's coverage was most positive on ABC, although evaluations still ran 58 percent negative. NBC split the difference with 63 percent bad press for the president.

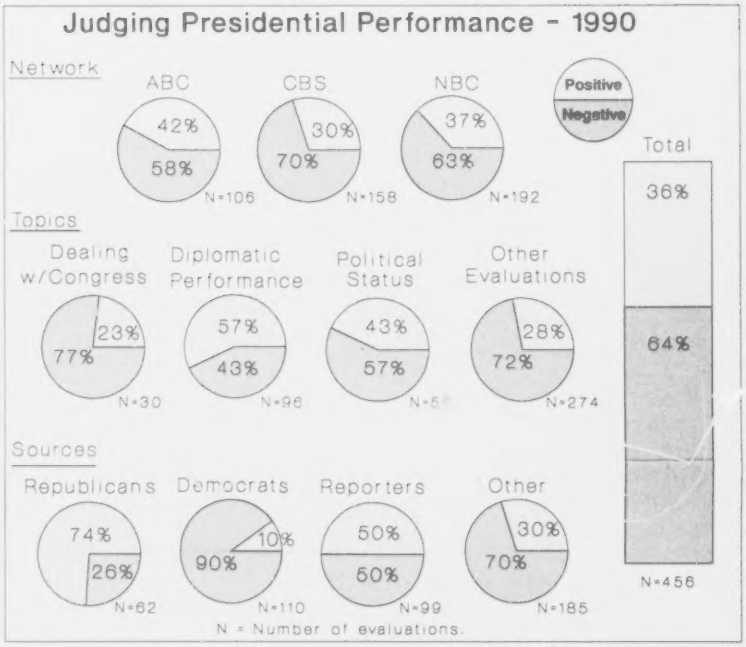
All three networks provided mostly praise for Bush's diplomatic performance, especially following his August efforts at building an interna-

The Honeymoon Is Over

Despite the rallying effect of the Gulf crisis, the Bush administration's media image soured during 1990. The president, his policies,

tional coalition to restore Kuwait. ABC's Brit Hume credited the international consensus on sanctions to "this president's personal and intensive style of diplomacy." (ABC 8/9) However, all other aspects of his job performance received mainly negative evaluations. The breakdown of budget talks in the fall prompted numerous criticisms of Bush's dealings with the Congress, contributing to his 77 percent negative rating on this front.

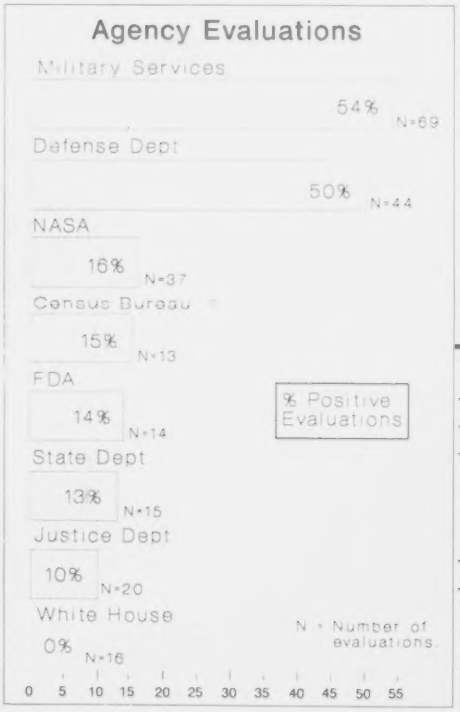
Three out of four Republican sources provided praise for Bush, while nine out of ten Democrats offered criticism. Democrat sources were more visible, however, outnumbering their GOP counterparts by nearly two-to-one (110 to 62). Non-partisan sources also had negative comments 70 percent of the time. The only group to offer evenly balanced evaluations of the president were reporters.



Cheers for the Troops

The military fared better on TV news than did their commander in chief. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines collectively received slightly more praise than criticism, and the Defense Department got balanced ratings. Prior to the deployment of troops to Saudi Arabia in August, however, 70 percent of the military's evaluations were negative. Thereafter, 67 percent of sources offered praise, such as General Norman Schwarzkopf's paean: "American troops are the best people in the whole world, and they deserve all the support they can get." (ABC 8/31)

Every other government department or agency that was the frequent topic of discussion received largely negative reviews. NASA, plagued by shuttle delays and trouble with the Hubble telescope, was the most frequent target of critics (with 31 negative and only 6 positive evaluations). NBC's Robert Bazell was among the more charitable when he noted that "NASA's trying to do a lot of things at once with a limited budget and, as a result, they're not doing all of them well." (NBC 6/29) Nonetheless, NASA's five-to-one ratio of criticism to praise was better than that of any other agency or department in the administration. Upon leaving Iraq, for example, an American ex-hostage vented his anger at Foggy Bottom: "I want everybody to know our State Department hasn't lifted a hand for us." (CBS 9/2)



Home Field Disadvantage

Five out of every six evaluations of the administration's handling of domestic policy issues (83%) were negative. The budget debate in October spawned frequent criticism of tax and budget policies. Indeed, October was the worst month ever for George Bush's press coverage, with nearly unanimous criticism from sources on both policy handling (91% negative) and overall job performance (94% negative). Sample comment, from NBC's Jim Miklaszewski: "After two days of flopping, flipping, and flailing around on the budget and taxes, President Bush told reporters

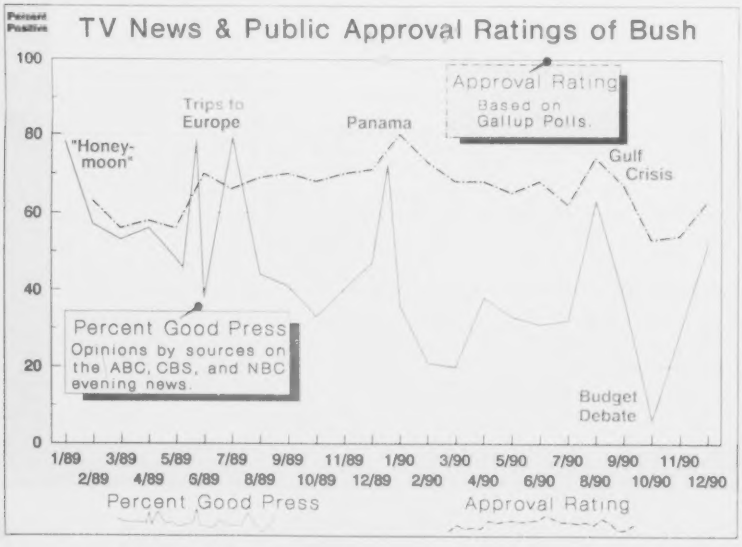
he would make it all perfectly clear. But it only got worse." (NBC 10/11) Drug policy, the environment, civil rights, and the savings & loan crisis were all problem areas for the administration. In fact, no sources (not even administration spokesmen) appeared on the evening news during 1990 to support government policy on the savings & loan issue.

Foreign policy was also widely criticized, although the administration received more support in this area. Overall, 61 percent of sources criticized its foreign policy initiatives. The Persian Gulf crisis dominated debate and matched the overall three to two margins of bad press. Many of the negative statements on Gulf policy came from Middle East sources (mainly Iraqis, Palestinians, and Jordanians). In contrast, U.S. sources were almost evenly balanced (49% positive). One former hostage assessed Bush's efforts this way: "I'm alive. No Americans died. He did a great job." (ABC 12/10) Critics, on the other hand, complained about the build-up of troops in November. NBC aired testimony from former Navy Secretary James Webb, who charged, "The President's error in sending so many troops should not be compounded by a further error of using them in a premature, unprovoked ground offensive." (NBC 11/29)

Rating Administration Policies

	Percent* Positive	Number of Sources
All Policy	29%	828
Domestic Policy	17%	381
Drugs	35%	48
Taxes	19%	26
Budget	14%	64
Environment	10%	41
Civil Rights	7%	27
Savings & Loan	0%	19
Foreign Policy	39%	447
Panama	52%	29
Defense	45%	44
Persian Gulf	40%	197
Soviet Union	33%	48
China	33%	39

*Based on source evaluations



Early in the year, the foreign policy debate focused on the invasion of Panama. This was the only major issue on which a majority (52%) of sources supported the administration. While the president received plaudits for Panama, he was frequently criticized for his policy on China and the Soviet Union.

From Nielsen to Gallup

The ebb and flow of Bush's public approval ratings is directly related to his TV news coverage. During the past two years, his poll ratings have consistently shifted in the direction of his media "ratings" whenever the coverage was both intensive and one-sided. The infrequent but intensive periods of good press for the president have each been followed by a quick rise in approval ratings, as measured by Gallup polls taken near the end of each month. They include the inaugural honeymoon, presidential trips to Europe early in 1989, the Panama invasion, and the first deployment of troops to the Persian Gulf. From July to August 1990, for example, Bush's level of good press rose from 32 percent to 63 percent. During this time, his public approval ratings rose from 62 percent to 74 percent.

Until recently, however, a prevalence of bad press was accompanied by more modest downturns in public support. This may reflect the president's low TV visibility. The volume of coverage has usually been much lower in Bush's many "bad press" months than in his few "good press" months. Indeed, his first sharp drop in popularity came in October 1990, after the budget debate brought his first intensive burst of bad press. That month Bush received the most evaluations of any month in his presidency, as well as the worst press - 94 percent negative, or 68 percent out of 72 evaluations by sources. During that period his approval ratings fell from 67 percent to 53 percent.

Since Bush's periods of good press have focused on foreign policy, while domestic policy debates have brought bad press, the coming months will represent a major test of his current popularity, as media attention returns to the home front.

Television News Coverage of the Persian Gulf War

Amount of Coverage

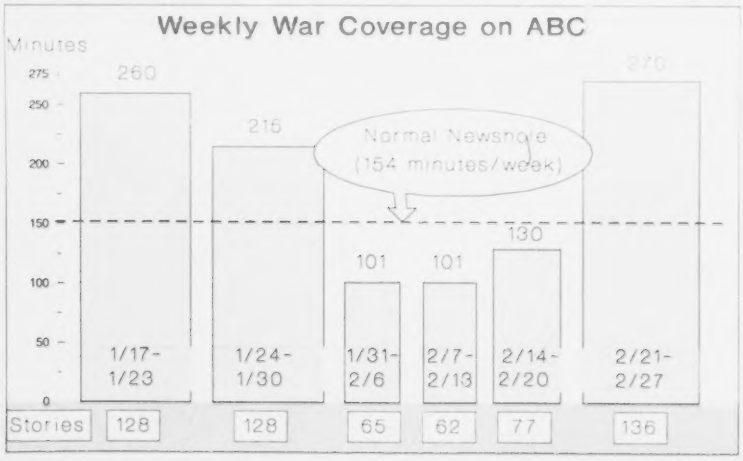
The Persian Gulf War set new records for TV news coverage. From January 17 until Bush's cease-fire declaration on February 27, there were 596 war stories on ABC's "World News Tonight," the most-watched evening news program. Coverage ebbed in early February during the third week of the air war, but returned with renewed intensity for a final, furious week of war and diplomacy. Indeed, the first and last weeks of the war included special expanded newscasts, which allowed the network's war coverage to exceed the entire 22 minute normal nightly newshole. In just 42 days, ABC devoted 17 hours and 56 minutes to the Gulf War, an average of more than 25 minutes per night.

Ironically, the single largest story topic of the Gulf War was the search for an end to it. ABC aired 68 stories on diplomatic efforts, nearly all after Iraq's initial withdrawal offer of February 15. But the Allied invasion of Kuwait changed the subject; more than one-third of the war news during the final week discussed the fighting in Kuwait.

Rating the Players

	Percent Positive	Number of Sources
U.S. Government	26%	92
Iraqi Government	21%	38
Israel	60%	15
USSR	38%	16
U.S. Military	97%	94
Iraqi Military	52%	73
George Bush	44%	18
Saddam Hussein	13%	38

Source: ABC World News Tonight, 1/17 - 2/27.



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The air war was the main story topic for the first two weeks of the fighting, but it attracted less attention as the war continued. By the end of February ABC had aired 52 stories on strategic bombing. The focus then turned to civilian damage in Iraq caused by the Allied attacks. A total of 62 stories documented civilian damage. Stories focusing on damage in Iraq outnumbered reports on Scud damage to Israel by a four to one margin.

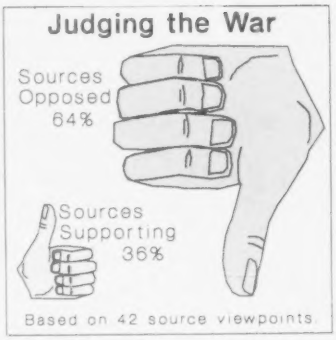
Both Sides Now

Nearly three out of four opinions (74%) expressed on U.S. Gulf policies were negative, almost matching the preponderance of bad press for the Iraqi government (79% negative). This reflects TV's effort to obtain the "other side" of the debate. Large numbers of hostile statements came from Middle Eastern sources--mainly Iraqis and Jordanians. For example the Iraqi Minister of Information told ABC's Bill Blakemore, who was stationed in Baghdad, "these civilian deaths mean George Bush is like Hitler and is a war criminal." (2/14) All but one of the 53 foreign sources (98%) criticized U.S. policy, while 23 out of 39 U.S. sources (or 59%) offered praise. A woman in an Atlanta diner, for example, reacted to the start of the war by saying, "it's great. I mean, it's time we took action." But the three to two margin of praise at home was overwhelmed by the nearly unanimous criticism from abroad.

Although U.S. policy was frequently criticized, the U.S. military was constantly praised. Nearly all (97%) of the 94 sources who evaluated our military gave it high marks for its performance. The Air Force alone received 18 positive comments out of 19. Another hero of the Gulf War was the Patriot missile, with 15 positive ratings out of 16. The U.S. Marines snared nine positive evaluations, including this

from General Schwarzkopf on the last day of the war, "I can't say enough about the two Marine divisions. If I used words like 'brilliant,' it would really be an under-description of the absolutely superb job they did...." (2/27)

A majority of sources (52%) also gave passing grades to the Iraqi military, especially the "elite" Republican Guard divisions. During the third week of the war, one retired U.S. general assured Peter Jennings that, "despite the terrible pounding that they're taking...[the Iraqis] were so well alerted to this operation, so well prepared, that they're able to tough it out." (2/1)



Finding War Wanting

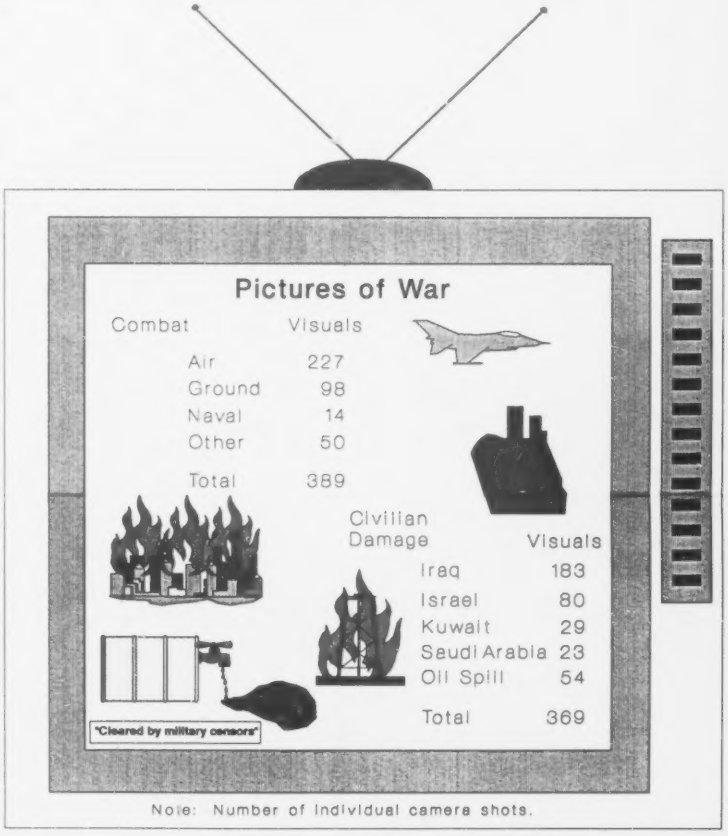
The liberation of Kuwait brought to a climax the domestic debate over the war itself. Opponents of the war outnumbered supporters by nearly a two-to-one margin (27 anti-war vs. 15 pro-war sources). Almost half of the war's critics were demonstrators or members of anti-war groups. For example, one protester condemned the "needless, unnecessary war against Iraq." (1/19) Another demonstrator provided the countervailing view: "As far as I'm concerned, the President's doing the right thing by trying to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait." (1/19)

The predominance of anti-war voices was also reflected in ABC's coverage of the demonstrations. Twenty stories focused on anti-war protesters, compared to eight stories on pro-war demonstrators. By contrast, a *Times Mirror* poll released January 31 found that three times as many Americans had attended pro-war rallies as anti-war rallies.

Images of War

The brevity of the ground war meant that most visual images came from the air war. ABC featured 227 pictures of air combat, mostly camera shots provided by the Pentagon from Allied planes, or of Patriot missile launches over Israel or Saudi Arabia. The "mother of all battles" yielded only 98 visuals of ground combat, about a quarter of all combat visuals.

Damage to civilian sites provided the most gripping visuals. More than half of all images of civilian damage (183) came from Iraq, including 43 pictures of dead or injured civilians. Many of these included shots of the bunker in Baghdad which was destroyed on February 13, killing hundreds of civilians. The high profile given to damage in Iraq contrasted to the coverage of Kuwait and Israel. Only 29 pictures--mostly distant views of burning oil fields--depicted damage to Kuwaiti sites. Nearly twice as many (54) showed damage to the Persian Gulf caused by the oil slick. And despite the Scud attacks on Israel from the war's onset, only 80 visuals depicted civilian damage there, including 17 pictures of human casualties.



The April *Media Monitor* will feature complete results on TV news Gulf War coverage.